

INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
AFRICAN LANGUAGES AND CULTURES

MEMORANDUM I



PRACTICAL ORTHOGRAPHY
OF AFRICAN LANGUAGES



Published by the
International Institute of African Languages and Cultures,
22 Craven Street, London, W.C. 2.

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PREFACE

The object of the following proposals is to recommend a uniform mode of writing the most important sounds found in Africa, and to set forth some general principles which should be taken as a basis for the construction of alphabets for particular African languages. The scheme has been drawn up in collaboration with experts in phonetics and in African languages from various countries.

The Institute will be glad to offer its advice in regard to the writing of sounds not included in the present scheme, and will welcome communications from any persons engaged in inventing orthographies for languages hitherto unwritten or improving orthographies which are at present unsatisfactory.

REPRESENTATION OF SOUNDS

1. The Institute recommends that African languages should be written on Romanic basis according to the following scheme.

CONSONANTS

2. (i) **b, d, f, h, k, l, m, n, p, s, t, v, w, z** shall have their English values, subject to the General Principles mentioned in § 18, and to the following special conditions:—

(a) When it is necessary to distinguish between aspirated and unaspirated **p, t, k**, the simple letters shall be employed to represent the unaspirated sounds, and the aspirated sounds shall be represented by **ph, th, kh**. **ph** is thus to be pronounced as in *loophole* (and not as *f*), **th** is as in *at home* (not as in *thin* or *then*), **kh** as in *back-hand*.

(b) When it is necessary to distinguish between dental **t, d**, and retroflex (cerebral) **t, d**, the ordinary letters shall be used for the dental sounds and the special letters **ṭ, ḍ** shall be used for the retroflex sounds.

- (ii) **g** shall have its hard value, as in *get, go*.
r shall stand for the rolled lingual (tongue-tip) **r** of Scottish pronunciation, or for the fricative **r** of Southern English.

x shall be used to represent the Scotch sound of *ch* in *loch* (the German *ach*-sound).

y shall have its consonantal value, as in *you*, *yet*.

ty, **dy**, **ny**, **ly**, **sy**, **zy** may be used to represent palatalized **t**, **d**, **n**, **l**, **s**, **z**.

ky, **gy** may be used to represent "fronted" **k**, **g**.

tl shall be used to represent the voiceless lateral explosive of South African languages.

kp, **gb** shall be used to represent the labiovelar consonants of West African languages.

N.B.—**s** is to have the value of German *ss* as in *Hass* (not the *s* in *Hase*). **v** is to have the value of North German labio-dental *w* (French and English *v*). **w** represents a non-syllabic *u* (a very short *u*). **z** is to represent the sound of *s* in German *Hase*.

(iii) It is recommended that the following special consonant letters be used to supplement the ordinary Roman letters (subject to General Principles, § 18):—

ŋ for the sound of *ng* in English *sing*, German *singen*.

f for "bi-labial *f*", as in Ewe **fu** (bone), **fo** (to beat), which have to be distinguished from **fu** (feather), **fo** (to tear off).

v for "bi-labial *v*", the middle and South German sound of *w*, the Ewe sound in **vu** (boat), **vo** (python), which words have to be

distinguished from *vu* (to tear), *və* (to be finished).

ʃ for the English sound of *sh*, French *ch*, German *sch*.

ʒ for the English sound of *s* in *pleasure*, French *j*.

ɣ for the velar fricative as in the colloquial pronunciation of *g* in German *Lage*.

NOTE.—It is now known that, on pedagogical, psychological and typographical grounds, specially designed letters are preferable to ordinary Roman letters with dots and accents placed above or below them. Such special letters, if properly designed, are no more difficult for an African to learn than ordinary Roman letters. Long experience with systems containing accented letters has shown that in practice the native African very frequently omits the accents, and confusion arises in consequence. Experts in the psychology of reading say that dots and accents give a blurred outline to words and thus impair their legibility. Printers find that dots and accents wear out more quickly than the letters, and are therefore apt to become indistinct in print.

In recommending the above special letters the Institute seeks to establish a system which will not be open to the criticisms levelled at previous systems by psychologists and typographical experts.¹

¹ “With the spread of religion over the world, the missionaries, usually educated men, have left, as has been said, examples of their erudition: but unfortunately they have shown little knowledge of typography, as is evidenced by the selection made by them of the miscellaneous accented characters with which they have unhappily endowed the scripts of many countries.”—*Typographical Printing Surfaces*, by Legros and Grant, 1916, p. 535.

“Our use to-day of a large number of diacritical marks attests the

(iv) It is recommended that the Affricate consonants be represented by groups of two letters thus : **pf**, **bv**, **ts** (= German sound of *z*), **dz** (the corresponding voiced sound), **tʃ** (English sound of *ch*), **dʒ** (English sound of *j*). In some cases it may be possible to use single letters in place of **tʃ**, **dʒ**; **c**, **j** are suggested for this purpose.¹

(v) It is recommended that the ejective consonants (i.e. consonants pronounced with "glottal stop") be represented thus : **p'**, **t'**, **k'**, **s'**, **ts'**, etc.; e.g. Hausa **k'ofa** (door), **ts'ofa** (old man).

3. The questions of the representation of clicks, implosive *b*, *d*, *g*, and the South African *hl*, *dl* (*dhl*), are reserved for further consideration.

VOWELS

4. The vowel letters, **a**, **e**, **i**, **o**, **u**, shall have the so-called "Italian" values. In cases where it is necessary to

persistent deficiencies of our alphabet."—*The Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading*, by E. B. Huey, 1913, p. 222.

"However, all the systems of phonetic writing and marking, often most carefully worked out from the philological and logical points of view, have been conspicuously lacking in revision from the psychological and pedagogical sides."—Huey, p. 358.

"Too often, as in the working out of systems of phonetic spelling by philologists, a system excellent from the philological or logical standpoint has lacked fitness to the psychic or hygienic conditions involved in reading."—Huey, p. 430.

¹ The form **j** is recommended in preference to **j**, on account of the international use of **j** in the sense of **y**.

distinguish between a "close" e and an "open" e,¹ the letter e shall represent the close vowel and the special letter ε shall be used for the open vowel. And when it is necessary to distinguish between a "close" o and an "open" o,² the letter o shall represent the close vowel and the special letter ɔ shall be used for the open vowel.

NASALIZATION

5. Nasalized vowels shall be denoted by the mark ~ placed over the vowel letter.

TABLE OF SOUNDS

6. The manner of representing African sounds recommended by the Institute is summarized in the table on page 8.

LENGTH

7. Long or doubled sounds shall be represented by doubling the letter. Examples: Luganda **sigga** (sow), **sigga** (scorpion), Akan **ɔmā** (he gives), **ɔmmā** (he does not give), Ewe **fa** (to be cool), **faa** (freely).

8. In some cases, especially where the lengthening of a vowel can be used for expressing two different meanings, the mark · following the letter may be used to denote length. Thus in Gã the words for "he is coming" and "he does not come" may be distinguished thus: **obaa**, **oba·**; both these are distinct from **oba** (he comes).

¹ As between the French é and è.

² As between the French vowels in *Beaune* and *bonne*.

CONSONANTS									
	Bi-labial.	Labio-dental.	Dental and Alveolar.	Post-alveolar.	Retroflex (Cerebr'l)	Palatal.	Velar.	Laryngal.	
(Explosive . . .	p b		t d		t ɖ	ty dy ky gy	k g		
Affricate . . .	pf bv		ts dz	tʃ dʒ (=c ʃ)					
Nasal . . .	m		n			ny	ŋ		
{ Explosive Lateral } Fricative			tl — ¹						
			— — ¹			ly			
Rolled and Flapped			l						
Fricative . . .	f v	f v	r			sy zy	x ɣ (w)	h	
Semi-vowel . . .	w		s z	ʃ ʒ		y			
VOWELS									
{ Close . . .	(u)					i	u		
Half-close . . .	(o)					e	o		
Half-open . . .	(ə)						ɛ	ə	
Open . . .							a		

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

DEFINITIONS

1. *Phonemes*

9. It often happens that two distinct sounds occur in a language, but the native is not aware that they are different, or at most regards one of them as an unimportant variety of the other. This happens where one of the sounds occurs only in certain positions in connected speech, while the other never occurs in those positions.

10. Thus in English the **k**'s in *keep* and *collar* are different sounds, but the use of these sounds is determined by the following vowel. Hence we regard them as two varieties of **k**. The same applies to the **k**'s in the French *qui*, *quoi*, and the German *Kiel*, *Kuh*.

11. Again, there are languages in which the sound **ŋ** occurs only in the groups **ŋk**, **ŋg**, but not in any other circumstances. In such a language the **ŋ** may be regarded as a variety of **n**. For instance, the *n* in the Italian *banca*, *lungo*, has the sound **ŋ**; but since **ŋ** does not occur in Italian as an independent sound (e.g. before a vowel), it may be regarded as a variety of **n**. On the contrary, in English and German **ŋ** is not a variety of **n**, because both occur in identical positions; compare English *sin*, *sing* (phonetically *sin*, *siŋ*), German *sinnen*, *singen*.

12. In Zulu there exist a "close" **e** and an "open" **e**. These sounds are, however, used in accordance with a certain principle of vowel harmony. Therefore they may

for practical purposes be regarded as one speech-unit in Zulu. (But the same sounds exist as separate speech-units in many other languages.) In the Akan language of West Africa the **w** in **wu**, **wo**, and **wɔ** is quite a distinct sound from the **w** in **wi**, **we**, and **wɛ**, but as the use of the two sounds is determined by the following vowel, they may be considered for practical purposes as one. In Kikuyu the sound **g** only occurs in the group **ŋg**, but the related sound **y** occurs in other positions though never after **ŋ**; **g** and **y** may, therefore, be treated as a single entity in Kikuyu. In Sechuana a **d**-like variety of **l** is used before **i** and **u**, but an ordinary **l** is used before all other vowels. The distinction is negligible from the point of view of the natives.

13. The term *Phoneme* is used to denote any small family of sounds which may be regarded as a single entity for reasons such as those applying to the above examples.

14. In very many cases phonemes consist of only one sound. Thus *phoneme* and *sound* are identical in the case of English **f**, **m**, **n**, **v**, since the pronunciation of these sounds is not affected by neighbouring sounds in the sentence.

15. It is phonemes that serve to distinguish one word from another in every language. The phonemes **n** and **ŋ** distinguish words in English and German, as mentioned above. "Close" **e** and "open" **e** distinguish words in French, Akan, Sechuana, and many other languages; they are separate phonemes in those languages.

2. *Diaphones*

16. Very often different speakers of the same language pronounce the same word in somewhat different ways. For instance, the value of the *a* in *bad* is different in different parts of England. In French and in German *r* is sounded by some with the tip of the tongue and by others with the uvula.

17. The term *Diaphone* is used to denote a normal sound together with the variants of it heard from different speakers of the same language.

PRINCIPLES OF ORTHOGRAPHY

18. The following General Principles should be observed in fixing the orthography of any particular language :—



























- (1) The Orthography of a given language should be based on the principle of one letter for each phoneme of that language. This means that whenever two words are distinguished in sound they must also be distinguished in orthography.
- (2) The existence of diaphones must be recognized and allowed for. Thus Fante speakers of Akan pronounce the syllable *di* as *dzi* and *ti* as *tsi*; but the orthography *di, ti* is adequate for covering both pronunciations. Again, the Hausa *f* is pronounced in some dialects as labio-dental *f*

and in others as bi-labial **f** and in others as **p** ; but the letter **f** can be used in orthography with the necessary conventions as to dialectal pronunciations.

- (3) It may sometimes be convenient to depart from a strictly phonetic system, in order to avoid writing a word in more than one way. Thus it is better to write in Luganda **soka oleke**, although the pronunciation is **sok oleke**. Similarly, it is better to write in Akan **ɔ hwɛ no** (he saw him), although in many districts the final **o** is not pronounced. Again, it is preferable to write always the same form of the Akan word **hwɛ**, in spite of the fact that it is actually pronounced **hwe** when followed by a syllable containing **i** or **u** (as in **ɔ hwɛ mu**).
- (4) As a temporary concession to existing usage an ordinary Roman letter may sometimes be used in place of one of the special new letters, when the sound denoted by the Roman letter does not occur in the language. Thus **f** may be used instead of **ɸ** in writing Sechuana, because the labio-dental **f** does not occur in that language. Similarly, **s** may be used instead of **ʃ** in writing Oshikwanyama because an ordinary **s** does not occur in that language. Again, if every **t** in a language is retroflex, the letter **t** can be used to represent it ; it is not necessary to employ the special symbol for the retroflex sound.

- (5) On psychological grounds it is considered better to abolish capital letters.¹ However, for those who prefer to continue the use of capitals the following forms are recommended: T, D, N, F, U, Σ, Z, X, E, O (for t, d, n, f, u, s, z, y, e, o respectively).

WRITTEN FORMS OF THE SPECIAL LETTERS

	Small.	Capital.		Small.	Capital.
t			j		
d	 or 	 (D = B)	y		
n			ε		
f			(e		
(f			o		
u			(s	 or 	

¹ "It seems probable that the use of two varieties of letters, capital and small, is more of a hurt than help to the eye and brain."—*Inertia of Eye and Brain*, by J. M'K. Cattell in *Brain*, vol. viii, 1885, p. 295.

SPECIMENS OF THE RECOMMENDED ORTHOGRAPHY

(The Lord's Prayer in Akan, Ewe, Hausa, Ila, Kikuyu, Sechuana, and Swahili)

NOTE.—Four of these specimens are printed without capital letters in accordance with principle (5), p. 13.

Akan (Twi dialect)

Yen agya a wowo soro, wo din ho nte; wo ahenni mmera; nea wope nye asase so, senea eye osoro; ma yen yen daa-aduan ne; na fa yen aka firi yen, senea yede firi won a wode yen aka; na mfa yen nko shwe mu, na yi yen fi bone mu; na wo na ahenni ne ahodon ne anuonyam ye wo dea daa.

*Ewe*¹

Mia Fofu, si le dzifowo. Wo nko nuti nako. Wo fiadufe nava. Woawo wo lonu le anyigba dzi, sigbe alesi wowona le dzifo ene. Na miafe nududu, si asu mia nu egbe la mi. Eye natsa miafe vodadawo ake mi, sigbe alesi miawo ha mietsona kea amesiwo daa vo de mia nuti la ene. Eye megakpla mi yi de tetekpa me o; ke de mi tso vofito la si me. Elabena towoe nye fiadufe kple nusẽ kple nutikokoe yi de mavomavo me.

¹ The conventional tone-marks have been retained in this specimen, but they have not been approved by the Institute. The whole question of the representation of tones has been reserved for further consideration.

Hausa

uban mu wanda ke tfikin sama. a ts'arkake sunan ka. mulkin ka fi zo. abin da ka ke so, a yi fi, tfikin duniya, kamar yada a ke yin sa tfikin sama. ka ba mu yao abintfin yini. ka gafarta mana basusuwan mu, kamar yada mu kuma mun gafarta ma mabartan mu. kada ka kai mu tfikin djaraba, amma ka tjetse mu daga mugun.

Ila

ufesu udi kwizeulu, nadiile izina dyako, nabuzize buɓneki bwako, nalutjitwe luzando lwako anfi ano ubudi kwizeulu. fido nfi tubula utupe kwasunu. utulekelele milandu, buɓna mbu tubalekelele kale obadi milandu kudi uswe. utatuenza mu kutepaulwa, utuwane ku bubiabe. ukuti buɓneki mbu bwako, iinsana, obulemu, fikwense o fikwense.

Kikuyu

ide wito we igoro, reetwa reaku nereamoro. odamaki waku ooke. o ore wendete we, newekagwo goko de, o ta ore wekagwo kou igoro. tohe omode irio ciito cia gotoigana. na otorekere madire maito, o ta ore idue torekagera area mare na madire maito. na ndogatotware magerio-ine, na kohonokia otohonokagie oorui-ine.

Sechuana

rara wa rona, eo o kwa lexolimo, leina ya xaxo a le itshephisiwe. pufa ea xaxo a etle. thato ea xaxo a e lirwe, mono lefatshin yaaka kwa lexolimo. o re fe xompieno seyo sa rona sa malatsi otlhe. o re itswharele

melato ea rona, yaaka re itfwharsa ba ba nan le melato le rona. o se re xoxele mo thaelon; mme o re xolole mo bofulen. xonne sa xaxo ele pufɔ, le thata, le kxalalelo, kaa bo sena bokhutlo.

Swaheli

Baba yetu, ulioko mbinguni. Litakate jina lako. Ufalme wako uje. Upendalo litendeke, kama mbinguni, na katika nci. Utupe leo tyakula tunatyo nitajia. Utusamehe deni zetu, kama tuwasamehevyo wawiwao na sisi. Usitulete katika nyonda, lakini utuokoe maovuni. Hakika yako wewe ni ufaume, na nguvu, na hejima, hata milele.

ALPHABETICAL ORDER OF THE LETTERS

a ã b c d dy dz dʒ ɖ e ē ε ē f f g gy gb ɣ h x i
ĩ j k ky kp l ly m n ny ŋ o ɔ ɔ̃ ã p r s sy ʃ t ty ts
tʃ tl ʈ u ũ v u w y z zy ʒ

It is recommended that in vocabularies and dictionaries words beginning with digraphs (ts, tʃ, kp, etc.) should be placed in separate groups following all the words beginning with simple t, k, etc.

NAMES OF THE CONSONANT LETTERS

b	c	d	ɖ	f	f	g	ɣ	h	x	j	k	l	m	n
be	ce	de	ɖa	ef	if	ga	ɣe	ha	ex	je	ke	el	em	en
		(tʃe)									(dʒe)			
ŋ	p	r	s	ʃ	t	ʈ	v	u	w	y	z	ʒ		
in	pe	ra	es	if	te	ʈa	ve	vi	wa	ya	ze	ʒi		

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